

Beyond the Human-Nature Debate: Human Corporeal Organisation as the 'First Fact' of Historical Materialism

With his 'anti-humanist' Marxism, Louis Althusser provoked a heated and still unresolved debate on the question of Marx's view of human nature. Those who, following Althusser, deny that Marx's materialist conception of history is grounded in a view of human nature have it fairly easy: they need only read – all too literally – the sixth of Marx's theses on Feuerbach which states that the human essence 'is no abstraction inherent in each single individual . . . [but] the ensemble of social relations'. Taking this statement as a categorical denial of any transhistorical human constants, they need not waste time thinking about how humans make their own history, but can focus exclusively on the structures that prevent them from doing so as they please.¹

Those who defend a notion of human nature, or of some kind of human constants, however, have a rather more difficult time of it – unless, of course,

¹ See Marx in Tucker 1978, p. 145. Of course, the sixth thesis on Feuerbach need not be read in the ultra-structuralist manner of Althusser and his followers. Oskar Negt for example, understands it not as an *a priori* denial of human constants, but as 'a research direction in relation to the Subject' (Negt 1988, p. 230).

they are content with a reductionist reading of Marx's definition of the first historical act as the satisfaction of needs, which gives rise to new needs and the means to satisfy them, and so forth.² The result of such an approach is a *Homo economicus* view of human nature as an organic bundle of easily definable material needs whose history is thus a dialectic of needs and technology.³

Those seeking a tenable, because sufficiently nuanced, historical-materialist definition of human nature, however, have a longer path to tread and more imposing obstacles to confront. For not only must they show that Marx's materialist conception of history rests on a view of human nature, but they must also define the attributes of that nature. In so doing, they must negotiate a variety of dilemmas, not least of which are the following: they must determine the relation between the natural/biological and social; they must speak of universals, yet avoid universalising a particularist notion, and still be able to account for how one species can produce a seemingly endless variety of cultural forms; they must be able to account for historical change without falling into a transhistorical Whiggishness and to discern the directions of historical changes without falling into teleologies; and, if they manage to avoid all of these traps, they must still determine the methodological place-value of human nature in historical-materialist theory and analysis.

Over the last twenty-five years, several works have taken up that challenge and attempted to offer a historical-materialist account of human nature. These include: John McMurtry, *The Structure of Marx's World View*; Gyorgy Márkus, *Marxism and Anthropology*; Kate Soper, *On Human Needs*; Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature*; William Peter Archibald, *Marx and the Missing Link: Human Nature*; Richard Lichtman, 'The Production of Human Nature by Means of Human Nature'; and, most recently, Sean Sayers's *Marxism and Human Nature*.⁴

² See Marx in Tucker 1978, p. 156.

³ This *Homo economicus* view of human nature and technologically-determinist view of history is undeservedly attributed to Engels and deservedly to the official Marxism of the Second and Third Internationals. G.A. Cohen defends a much more sophisticated version of this dialectic of needs and technology in *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. In different ways, Theodor Adorno and Jean Baudrillard attributed this view of human nature and history to Marx – the former with his accusation that Marx wanted to turn the world into a workhouse and the latter with the accusation that Marx was imprisoned within the categories of bourgeois political economy. See Adorno 1975, p. 241 and Baudrillard 1975.

⁴ All of these works take several steps toward determining the nature of human nature, but come up short – largely because, as I argue below, they are not materialistic enough and fail to root their depiction of human nature in human corporeal organisation.

Although they travel along different paths, all of these works are headed in the same general direction and share the common goal of overcoming the obstacles mentioned above in order to provide a historical-materialist definition of human nature. It is my contention that, though heading in the right direction, these works have bogged down while attempting to negotiate those theoretical obstacles, and have become entangled in seemingly endless battles with their antagonists. As I shall argue below, the reason they have stalled is that they are not materialistic enough and have failed to grasp Marx's materialist conception of history by its corporeal roots. In order to explain why these works have fallen short of their goals, I will consider briefly one of the most recent attempts, Sean Sayers's *Marxism and Human Nature*. Then I shall suggest an alternative way of formulating the problem and a research direction, both following the 'corporeal turn' which Marx took with his off-hand, but foundational comment that 'human corporeal organisation' is the 'first fact to be established' for historical theory.

'Human nature' as a categorical trap

Acknowledging the 'controversy and . . . confusion' generated by the question of human nature, Sayers seeks 'to restate, and to clarify and defend, a fundamental and central strand of Marxist philosophy', that is, its 'historicist account of human nature'.⁵ Sayers is convinced that this historicist account of human nature will enable him to carve a path between and beyond the poles of such conceptual binaries as essentialist universalism vs. relativism and natural vs. socio-cultural. He promises to go 'out of [his] way to bring [this account] into relation and dialogue with other contemporary philosophical positions and to show its relevance within the context of the wider current philosophical debate' and 'to show how Marxism involves . . . an unfamiliar and . . . illuminating approach to problems which appear intractable from within a more traditional and familiar philosophical perspective'.⁶

Sayers's overly Hegelianised (and by no means unfamiliar) historicist account of human nature, however, casts only a translucent light. While attempting to find a resolution of these binary oppositions, he does effectively wield the historicism that he attributes to Marx against several of Marx's critics. He exposes the obvious problems with essentialist absolutism and

⁵ Sayers 1998, p. 13.

⁶ Ibid.

arbitrary relativism, with the ahistoricism of analytical Marxism, the myopic utopianism of Andre Gorz's vision of the liberation from work, and with the inflated charges of those environmentalists who accuse Marx of Promethean productivism. But he fails to resolve the problems posed by the binary oppositions, and therefore does not succeed in the most important matter: the construction of an efficacious historical-materialist conception of human nature. Consequently, as Terry Eagleton has relentlessly shown,⁷ the problems remain as intractable at the end of the book as they were in the beginning. Here, I want to focus on what I consider the fundamental problem – one that has beset not only Sayers's book, but virtually all attempts to construct a historical-materialist view of human nature. And that is the problem resulting from the invocation of a human nature in order to avoid relativism, combined with a reticence about defining that nature (except as becoming in a historicist sense) in order to avoid essentialism.

Sayers chooses to stake his theoretical claim on the field already surveyed by Kate Soper, who insisted (specifically regarding a Marxist theory of needs, but also applicable to Sayers's undertaking) that 'all theorisation . . . must necessarily live in the field of forces created by the antithetical poles of relativism and essentialism'.⁸ One should not, indeed cannot, avoid engaging with relativism and essentialism in the attempt to develop a notion of human nature. But the choice to fight the theoretical battles on the conceptual terrain between these two poles enhances the risk of becoming entrapped between them, instead of carving out a position beyond them. And this is Sayers's greatest dilemma. Unable to escape the conceptual space delineated by these antithetical poles, he attempts to hold the middle ground. Caught between universalist essentialism and arbitrary relativism, his strategic problem is that he commits himself to fighting a two-front battle on the conceptual terrain delineated by his binary antagonists. And, his tactical problem is that, while he engages his antagonists one at a time, he yields to the temptation of alternately borrowing the conceptual weaponry of each to attack the other. So, against the universalists, naturalists, and essentialists, he argues that there is no universal human nature or essence. But, against the relativists and extreme social constructionists, he argues that since *Homo sapiens* is the species whose nature is to create its own nature, essential human nature is in the process of (progressively) becoming. Trapped in a defensive position, Sayers

⁷ See Eagleton 1999.

⁸ Soper 1981, p. 123.

remains too pre-occupied insisting that there is such a thing as human nature, yet he never delineates it sufficiently to win the battle.⁹

While Sayers is tautologically correct in stating that the nature of humans is to make their own nature and their own histories, the fundamental problem is that he fails to explain what it is about human beings that enables them to do so. He justifies his hesitation to define human nature with the quite correct insistence that human universals, such as biological needs, are malleable and always socio-culturally mediated, and thus can only be discussed with a certain degree of abstraction. But abstractions, as Marx very consciously wielded them, can be both meaningful and methodologically invaluable (see below). Moreover, the particularity of their manifestations does not abrogate the universality of needs: if some people refuse to eat what others consider a delicacy, the fact is that both have a minimum caloric requirement. Because he does not define (in consciously abstract terms) such universal needs as a first step toward analysing the different forms given them by different cultures, he produces, by default, a philosophy of history consisting of a formless species that somehow forms itself while making its own history.¹⁰ Unable to

⁹ Moving back and forth between the natural and social dimensions of human nature (Sayers 1998, pp. 151–6), he concludes that ‘in short, there is both a universal and a particular, a natural and a social, aspect to human nature’ (Sayers 1998, p. 153). This is, of course, true, but it leaves the relation between the natural and social completely unresolved. And without establishing what that relation is, it is, as these pages show, impossible to escape the conceptual ground delineated by the binaries. Soper, too, succumbs to the same two-front battle. She writes: ‘For who was it, if not Marx himself, who showed us that individuals do not inherit their needs (except to a minimal degree, and even then only in the most abstract conception) in the form of a natural, biological patrimony, but acquire their needs (including the content of their “basic” physiological and psychological needs) eccentrically, and independently of their wills, through their encounter with the objective social patrimony into which they are born and through which they live out their lives?’ (Soper 1981, pp. 194–5). And she summarises that Marx himself constantly insists that ‘it is on pain of mouthing the most “dumb generalities” . . . that one reduces [needs] to their basis in the individual, and fails to take account of the way in which social institutions have always operated upon natural “givens” so as to create the distinctive, cultural existence that is human existence’ (Soper 1981, p. 195). While we must, of course, avoid ‘dumb generalities’, we must also avoid the trap of talking about the body, in this case, its biological needs, as a ‘simple prerequisite’ – which is what happens if we focus only on the socio-culturally specific mediations of needs and neglect the needs themselves that are mediated.

¹⁰ On this matter, Sayers relies heavily on Richard Lichtman. I agree fully with Lichtman’s formal statements that nature is ‘the condition of embodied practice’, that human beings are ‘self-constituting, that we are simultaneously the subject and object of our own activity’, that human nature provisionally understood is ‘the structure of capacities, tendencies, and sensibilities that humans bring, incompletely formed to their life world’ and that ‘the self-constitution of human nature means the production of a variety of fundamentally different human natures’ (Lichtman 1990, pp. 14–18).

figure out how to ground historical theory in human nature, he ends up having history produce human nature. In a definitional sleight of hand, he introduces us to a human nature – but one that resembles an invisible ink drawing on an apparent *tabula rasa*: the sketch is there, but its form and contents can only be brought forth by the light of its own history. Without having explained, however, what it is about humans that enables them to create their own nature and to make their own histories, how that nature affects (and limits) the histories they make, and thus where it belongs in historical-materialist analysis, Sayers methodologically reduces the human nature on which he so emphatically insists to the status of merely a ‘simple prerequisite’ (the term Marx used in depicting the political economists’ treatment of use-value).¹¹

Seeking to establish an efficacious, but not essentialist notion of human nature, Sayers’s only recourse is to appeal to a future-perfect historicism. And this traps him in a difficult place; for he can only argue, in effect, that, since human nature is in the process of becoming, there is no human nature until it will have become; and, until it will have become, it cannot be described except in what he considers empty abstractions. This methodological insistence on an essentially formless human nature that forms itself in the course of its history results in a kind of teleonomic progressivism: history has no teleological purpose, but it is a one-way street: since human nature is to cultivate itself, and since this self-cultivation is cumulative, history is the progressive development of human nature – the measure of which is the mutually reinforcing expansion of human needs and human productive capacities.¹²

The problem with such progressivism, of course, is that it must view history as an ascending arrow and it measures historical time by its great leaps forward. Though it frees the future from *a priori* essentialism, it imprisons the past in ‘primitivism’. According to this logic, past or present ‘under-

But at least two of his particular formulations have unfortunate implications. One is the perhaps unintended Whiggish progressivism embedded in his notion that we are born ‘incomplete’, (Lichtman 1990, pp. 15–18), that ‘as we appropriate the world, we come to appropriate ourselves and produce ourselves as distinctly human’ (Lichtman 1990, p. 21). This is obviously true ontogenetically, the case of a child growing into culture, which is the situation that Lichtman most often addresses explicitly in his essay. But if applied phylogenetically, which Sayers explicitly does, the notion that we are born incomplete entails a Whiggish view of history ascending from the ‘primitive’ to the ‘truly human’.

¹¹ See Marx 1857, pp. 227 and 540.

¹² To be sure, several passages throughout Marx’s writings seem to entail this progressivist view of human nature. I have argued elsewhere that such unidirectional progressivism is counter to historical-materialist logic (see Fracchia 1991).

development' can only be understood as various, perhaps necessary, but nevertheless still incomplete stages in the process of human self-cultivation. The complex histories of 'precapitalist' socio-cultural forms are reduced to one-dimensionality and considered only in terms of their contribution to the self-production of human nature. Such an approach only lets us measure what we have gained, not treasure what we have lost; and it can only treat the barbarism of what, according to this itinerary, should have been the most civilised of centuries, the twentieth, as atavistic remnants of a primitive past, rather than a product of 'civilised' human productive capacities.

These problems resulting from the simultaneous appeal to relativism to avoid essentialism, and to the historicist becoming of an essential human nature to avoid relativism, are not peculiar to Sayers's analysis, but remain unresolved in most historical-materialist accounts of human nature. Insofar as they attempt to avoid the binary extremes of dogmatic essentialism and arbitrariness, these works are headed in the right direction. But they have ultimately fallen short. As mentioned above, the reason for this is that they are not materialist enough. An historical-materialist conception of human nature that could not only avoid the binaries that entrapped Sayers but also perform all the tasks mentioned in the opening paragraph must be able to explain both the universal attributes of human beings and the relative autonomy (though not arbitrariness) of human socio-cultural forms.

Corporeal roots

I argue that the means to develop such a conception of human nature is to take seriously and to elaborate – in a manner consistent with his materialist conception of history, but well beyond what he had in mind – a seemingly offhand and almost universally neglected, but nevertheless very striking, aphorism that Marx tossed off in the *German Ideology* while laying the foundations of his materialist conception of history. There he suggested that human nature needed to be radically rethought, grasped by its *corporeal* roots.

To differentiate himself from 'German philosophers' who were 'devoid of premises', Marx began by stating his own: 'the first fact to be established' for historical theory is 'the corporeal organisation of human beings'.¹³ The

¹³ Marx 1845a, p. 21. Marx's words are 'körperliche Organisation der Menschen' – Tucker's translation of which as 'physical organisation' (1978, p. 148) is imprecise and misleading.

foundational force of this formulation and the immense range of its implications make its neglect rather puzzling to say the least. True, it appears, at first glance, to be an offhand comment, and it is certainly overshadowed by the prefatory 'Theses on Feuerbach', the sixth of which apparently dissolves human universals into the changing 'ensemble of social relations'. Nevertheless, I would argue that this statement about human corporeal organisation and the sixth thesis on Feuerbach are complementary, rather than contradictory. In the sixth thesis, Marx rid himself of the philosophical baggage carried by the notion of a human 'essence'; he rejected the notion of an essence or nature embedded *a priori* in all human beings, and insisted instead that the manifestations of human being are produced by humans living in specific sets of social relations and thus vary accordingly. With the other statement, a strong, concretely corporeal one about human universals, he alluded to the transhistorical attributes of human corporeal organisation that underlie and make possible the infinite though not unlimited range of those changing manifestations of human being – that is, of socio-cultural forms.

This grounding of historical materialism in human corporeal organisation presents a number of daunting challenges perhaps best summarised by Terry Eagleton's formulation of the question that animated Marx's massive undertaking: 'What if an idea of reason could be generated up from the body itself, rather than the body incorporated into a reason which is always already in place? What if it were possible, in a breathtaking wager, to retrace one's steps and reconstruct everything – ethics, history, politics, and rationality – from a bodily foundation?'¹⁴ This attempt to rethink history up from the body is, as Eagleton continues,

fraught with perils . . . [H]ow could it safeguard itself from naturalism, biologism, sensuous empiricism, from a mechanical materialism or false transcendentalism of the body every bit as disabling as the ideologies it seeks to oppose? How can the human body, itself in part a product of history, be taken as history's source? Does not the body in such an enterprise become simply another privileged anteriority, . . . spuriously self-grounding . . . ?¹⁵

In the remainder of this essay, I will take up this wager and attempt to develop the outlines of what might be called a 'historical-materialist taxonomy of human being' – and one that is capable of negotiating these problems as well

¹⁴ Eagleton 1990, p. 197.

¹⁵ Ibid.

as those on which Sayers and others have foundered. In so doing, I will show that, if the attempt to rethink history up from the body is fraught with perils, it is also laden with possibilities.

Other than his comments on human needs, Marx never systematically elaborated what he meant by 'human corporeal organisation' – leaving perhaps the impression that he too treated the body solely as the locus of needs or as only a 'simple prerequisite'. I argue, however, that a systematic and foundational corporeal logic is present behind the numerous passages on human corporeal organisation scattered throughout his writings. In *Capital*, for example, corporeally based categories such as use-value and concrete labour were crucial to his deciphering of the logic of capitalist exploitation; and throughout the long chapters on the production of absolute and relative surplus-value, he measures the degree of workplace-produced immiseration in terms of the deformation of the body, the flip-side of which is that the free cultivation of bodily attributes and capacities is essential to any historical-materialist notion of freedom.¹⁶ Although (and also because) Marx never systematically elaborated the very corporeal foundations of human being in which he rooted his critique of capitalism, it is a task well worth undertaking.

Because of its focus on human corporeal organisation, the historical-materialist attempt to delineate the attributes of *Homo sapiens* certainly runs against the idealist current of discussions of 'human nature' in the Western intellectual tradition since Socrates. The longevity and one-dimensional idealism of that tradition has burdened the term 'human nature' with too much philosophical baggage – baggage that all too easily diverts attention away from the body. This explains perhaps why even historical materialists such as McMurtry, Geras, Soper, Lichtman and Sayers, all of whom cast glances of varying duration at human corporeal organisation, do not go beyond treating it as a 'simple prerequisite'.¹⁷

¹⁶ On the corporeal roots of Marx's categories see Fracchia 2004b; on the corporeal depths of Marx's concept of immiseration, see Fracchia 2004a.

¹⁷ McMurtry insists that the essential attributes of a historical-materialist definition of 'human nature in general' are the human capacity for material self-realisation and the 'projective consciousness' (see below) that enables humans to imagine that self-realisation. Though he recognises the importance of 'bodily instruments' that enable humans to accomplish that self-realisation, he conceptualises them under the category of 'other' (McMurtry 1978, p. 34). In speaking of the capacities that make socialism possible and which are potentially accessible to all human beings, Geras lists only mental and behavioural qualities such as civic intelligence, responsibility, mutual sympathy, a deep feeling for human equality, etc. and neglects the bodily capacities that make the production of human worlds possible in the first place and that form

Because the philosophical baggage accumulated by the idea of 'human nature' seems to be weighing so heavily on the minds of those who would develop a historical-materialist alternative, it might be best to begin by finding an appropriately historical-materialist, categorical replacement for 'human nature'. A renaming of the undertaking might help to alleviate that burden. As mentioned above, I suggest that we understand the historical-materialist search for human corporeal constants as a 'historical-materialist taxonomy'. Like any other term, this one has possible disadvantages and dangers. Such a biological term could easily raise the spectre of the mechanistic dialectic of nature that produces and inexorably leads *Homo economicus* to communism, or it could degenerate into an endless listing of human body parts and thereby become completely divorced from a materialist conception of history. However, given the current state of the debate over a historical-materialist view of 'human nature', it has two distinct, and interrelated advantages: if, as I have suggested, it has indeed been the philosophical baggage of 'human nature' that has acted as a drag preventing historical-materialist analyses of human constants from being sufficiently corporeal and materialist, from following Marx's 'corporeal turn', then a renaming of the undertaking as 'A Historical-Materialist Taxonomy of Human Corporeal Organisation' might help us to rethink its contents and enable us to overcome that drag and take that turn.¹⁸

the interior structure of artefacts, whether material or semiotic. Kate Soper makes perhaps the greatest overture toward the body. She is emphatic about the bodily locus of needs and the importance of human biology to 'human nature', and she advocates a 'new area of investigation' that she calls 'social biology'. Understandably wanting to avoid an essentialist definition of human nature, she also insists emphatically that needs are always socio-culturally mediated, and that there is never any purely natural human being. Accordingly, her social biology ends up focusing exclusively on social mediations without having explained what is being mediated. In short, she treats the body as a 'simple prerequisite'. And this is the same problem that has plagued all those from Alfred Schmidt to Sean Sayers who want to hold onto a historical-materialist view of human nature without falling into biological essentialism. They remain suspended between the two poles because they treat human corporeal organisation, as a simple prerequisite that is introduced and then dismissed, rather than serving as the first fact for, as the foundation of, historical-materialist theory.

¹⁸ Another reason to use a term with such biological connotations is that it recalls Marx's enthusiasm for Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) as providing the natural scientific foundation for his own theory. The affinities between Darwin's materialist conception of prehistory and Marx's materialist conception of history lie in their mutual understanding of the human mind as an *embodied* mind, of *Homo sapiens* as a thinking *body*. As we shall see below, the category that will provide the criteria for inclusion in a historical-materialist taxonomy, and which can also help to explain the relation between Marx and Darwin, is Marx's category of 'objectification [*Vergegenständlichung*]'. Usually overlooked by critics, this absolutely central, and inescapably corporeal category entails the employment of evolved bodily instruments

To ensure that this taxonomy keeps to its historical-materialist path and can effectively lead us through Marx's corporeal turn, its construction must be guided by historical-materialist principles. The historical-materialist principle that could best serve as the guiding thread to such a taxonomic endeavour is Marx's oft-repeated aphorism about human beings and their histories, namely that 'people make their own history, but not always as they please'. Marx generally intended this aphorism to refer to socially determined capacities of people to make their own history and to social limits and constraints on people doing so as they please. But, behind changing social capacities such as the specific character of technology, it is the set of corporeal capabilities that establishes the possibilities for humans to make their own histories; and beyond the changing limits of inherited socio-cultural conditions, it is the set of corporeal constraints, the needs and limits embedded in human corporeal organisation, that prevents humans from making their histories as they please, that imposes limits on the variability of human cultures and on human malleability. A taxonomy constructed according to this principle must delineate *both* the capacities *and* the constraints embedded in the corporeal organisation of *Homo sapiens*. In so doing, it would establish the range, that is, the infinite but not unlimited possibilities, of all too human worlds.

If Marx's aphorism about people making their own history though not as they please provides a general direction, the next step is to establish the criteria for inclusion in a historical-materialist taxonomy. The path toward the body can be specified more clearly by focusing on the fundamental historical-materialist concept denoting human history-making – the concept of 'objectification [*Vergegenständlichung*]'. Developed in the 1844 *Manuscripts* as a materialist alternative to Hegel's idealist category of 'externalisation [*Entäusserung*]', objectification is the crucial concept that enabled Marx to complete his historical-materialist redefinition of the subject-object relation and thereby to effect his *Aufhebung* of philosophy. The mainstream of Western philosophy had always defined the subject (and human nature) in terms of its capacity to know and the object as the object of knowledge. With the concept of 'objectification', however, Marx was able to redefine the content of this relation by conceiving of subjects as makers and objects as the

and dexterities in the process of transforming nature and constructing human worlds – that is, the making of history. 'Objectification' thus points both 'backward' toward the evolutionary process, described by Darwin that resulted in a corporeal form capable of labour, language and culture, and 'forward' to the human histories described by Marx.

'belaboured [*bearbeitete*]' objects. With this much broader, and therefore much more appropriate, definition of subjects as makers of artefacts, Marx reduced the production of knowledge, which the philosophers had elevated as the defining attribute of human nature, to one among many crucial human capabilities; and he therewith reduced knowledge to one – perhaps the most important, but nevertheless only one – of the possible kinds of human artefacts.

There is no space here to elaborate this fully, but it is a mistake to view objectification as applicable solely to the production of material objects. It is true that after the 1844 *Manuscripts*, during his long quest to decipher the social hieroglyphics of capital, Marx used 'objectification' primarily in the context of his economic studies. Nevertheless, as is indicated by his use of the term in the *Manuscripts* to depict the apprehension of the world by human sense organs, he intended its range to be understood much more broadly: 'objectification' is the dialectical category depicting the interaction of subjects with the world, both natural and social. Provisionally and very generally defined, objectification describes the ways in which humans (or any species for that matter¹⁹) living in distinct social groups work over, rework, and transform the given (the 'natural' as well as the pre-existing socio-cultural) into human worlds made in the image of their own bodily form, capacities, and practices. The modes of objectification are as many as human capacities and practices; and the results of objectification are worlds of artefacts – material, social and semiotic.

The centrality of the concept of objectification to a historical-materialist view of human nature and, accordingly, of the histories that humans make through their objectifications has not gone unnoticed. Gyorgy Márkus points to objectification as the key category that distinguishes Marx's historical-materialist understanding of human beings from that of the 'old materialism'.²⁰ What John McMurtry conceptualises as the 'projective consciousness' ('the ability to raise a structure in imagination and then erect it in social reality') and insists is the 'essential feature of human nature' for Marx, is (almost) precisely what Marx means by objectification.²¹ What is, from a corporeally-

¹⁹ According to Lewontin (1985, pp. 85–106), all species are capable of objectification; for, even if instinctually rather than intentionally, all species create their environments (beavers' dams, spiders' webs, beehives, etc.) by transforming what is naturally given into worlds made in the image of their own needs and capacities.

²⁰ Márkus 1978, p. 7.

²¹ McMurtry's 'projective consciousness' rests on a notion of intentionality that is applicable to the labour process, whether in the factory or the artist's or musician's studio. The emphasis on intentionality is, however, too restrictive to explain either

rooted historical-materialist perspective, frustrating about both of these works, however, is that, once they point out the centrality of the concept of objectification for a historical-materialist delineation of human nature, they then turn away, back to the products of objectification and to history, rather than enquire further into what it is that enables and limits, that establishes the multi-dimensional, but nevertheless limited, range and modes of human objectification. McMurtry, for example, with his reference to the 'bodily instruments' that make objectification possible, does imply more than the insufficient nod in the direction of the body made by most authors attempting a historical-materialist account of human nature. But, by classifying them as 'other' capacities – that is, other than the 'essential' human capacity of projective consciousness²² – he reduces them to, and dismisses them as, a 'simple prerequisite'. It is, then, not enough just to nod in acknowledgement that historical materialism is rooted in the body before relegating it to a marginalised status. Rather, if human corporeal organisation is the 'first fact' to be established for a materialist conception of history, then the links between that corporeal organisation and the peculiarly human modes of objectification must be established. And, in order to show to establish those links and thereby to conceive of human corporeal organisation as not just a 'simple prerequisite', but as the foundation and starting point for historical-materialist theory, it is necessary to proceed to the next step of this undertaking: to develop the categorial apparatus for the depiction of those aspects of human corporeal organisation that enable human beings to make their own, albeit constrained, histories.

Anlage

To develop this conceptual apparatus, we might begin by considering a term that appears irregularly in Marx's works, always in the context of defining the general attributes of human being. This term, *Anlage*, is one whose generic character makes it a promising candidate for bringing categorial order to a historical-materialist taxonomy of human corporeal organisation.²³ Generally,

what Marx meant by speaking of sense perception as a process of objectification or the kind of collective processes of objectification that produce semiotic artefacts (language, symbolic forms). It would, I think, be more accurate to say that the projective consciousness is the crucial component of one (very productive) mode of objectification, but is not a prerequisite for objectification (see note 18).

²² McMurtry 1978, p. 34.

²³ Perry Anderson calls attention to a passage in the *Grundrisse* in which Marx

Anlage refers to a 'facility', 'arrangement', 'installation' or 'disposition'. For my purposes, appropriately, the term also has a specific biological application meaning the 'natural tendency' or, in the plural *Anlagen*, the 'hereditary factors' that predispose an organism to act in certain ways. Given this definition, *Anlagen* may serve as the generic category for the 'predispositions' inherent in human corporeal organisation and thus as the ordering principle for a historical-materialist taxonomy of *Homo sapiens*.

As the generic category encompassing all attributes of human corporeal organisation, *Anlagen* must be subdivided into sets of subcategories that can cover the range of Marx's references to the body and also include dimensions of human corporeal organisation that he did not address but that belong to a historical-materialist taxonomy of *Homo sapiens*. If the guiding thread of a materialist conception of history is that people make their own history, but not as they please, then the two major categorial subdivisions of *Anlagen* or corporeal dispositions would accordingly have to be the capabilities and constraints embedded in human corporeal organisation – the corporeal capabilities that enable people to make their own history, and the corporeal constraints that prevent them from doing so as they please.

Surveying Marx's scattered comments about corporeal capabilities, we find the following: in the 1844 *Manuscripts*, he devoted some of his most powerful prose in praise of the human capacity to apprehend the world sensually through employment of what Marx called the theoretical powers of the senses, or what J.J. Gibson would later call the body's 'perceptual systems'.²⁴ Discussing the bodily prerequisites of labour in the *Grundrisse*, he wrote that 'No production [is] possible without an *instrument* of production, even if it is only the hand. No production without stored-up, past labour, even if it is only the *dexterity* gathered together and concentrated in the hand of the primitive through repeated practice'.²⁵

speaks of 'needs, capacities, wants, and productive powers of individuals [*Bedürfnisse, Fähigkeiten, Genüsse, Produktivkräfte etc. der Individuen*]' and then uses the term 'creative dispositions [*schöpferische Anlagen*]'. From this passage, it would appear that Marx used the term *Anlagen* to refer to those attributes that enable humans to make their own history, and that limiting factors are not to be considered *Anlagen*. I shall argue, however, that those limiting factors (needs, wants, bodily limits and constraints) should be considered *Anlagen* since they also 'predispose' humans to find food, shelter, satisfy desires, take care not to overstep bodily limits that would result in death, and so forth. See Marx 1857, p. 387 and Anderson 1988.

²⁴ See Marx in Tucker 1978, pp. 86–92 and J.J. Gibson 1983.

²⁵ See Marx 1857, p. 7 [emphases added].

In *Capital*, when discussing the labour process in general, he spoke of labour as an embodied process and about embodied instruments of labour. In the labour process, humans set in motion 'the natural *powers* belonging to [their] embodiment', and all labour involves the labourer's use of a means of labour, the most original (in the temporal sense) and the most immediate (in the spatial sense) of which were the labourer's own '*bodily organs*'. Echoing Marx's reference to the hand, Engels, in his essay on 'The Role of Labour in the Humanisation of the Ape', pointed to bipedality as the decisive step in human evolution, since its result was that 'the hand had become free and was able constantly to develop new *dexterities*' – the hand therefore is 'not only the organ of labour', it is also its product. Engels, not afraid of risking a bad pun, concluded that the development of the sense organs and the production of cultural artefacts went 'hand in hand' with the development of the hand through labour:

through the constantly renewed application of this hereditary refinement [of the hand] to new, increasingly complicated tasks, the human hand attained that high degree of perfection on the basis of which it could conjure forth the paintings of Raphael, the statues of Thorvaldsen, the music of Paganini.²⁶

From these passages, we can glean two subdivisions within the set of bodily attributes enabling humans to make their own histories. The references to the hand and other bodily organs as instruments of labour may be subsumed under the category of 'bodily instruments'.²⁷ In addition to the human hand, whose opposable thumb, flexible digits, and prehensile grasp were so appreciated by Marx and Engels, the most obvious of these bodily instruments are the uniquely flexible human supra-laryngeal tract which is the absolute prerequisite for all human languages and thus human cultures; the human 'perceptual systems', and, of course, the unique human brain. (A historical-materialist taxonomy considers *Homo sapiens* a thinking body, rather than, as is so current today, an embodied mind; while the latter treats the body only as a site for thinking, the former situates the mind where it belongs: as one of the many indispensable human bodily instruments²⁸).

²⁶ Engels 1973, pp. 445–7.

²⁷ This term is John McMurtry's (McMurtry 1978, p. 34). Though Marx may not have used the term 'körperliche Instrumente' (I know of no such precise usage), McMurtry is surely justified in using the term 'bodily instruments' to refer collectively to Marx's scattered references to the body's tools.

²⁸ The positivist-Marxist theory of consciousness, the economic-reductionist, mirror theory of mind, was developed primarily by Second-International Marxists in the late

These uniquely human bodily instruments are deployed in an astonishing variety of ways, giving rise to what Marx called bodily dexterities (which, of course, change according to socio-cultural form, though not always in a progressive manner – as evidenced by Marx’s graphic descriptions in *Capital* of the atrophy of so many corporeal dexterities effected by the capitalist labour process). Perhaps the most crucial dexterity in human evolution is bipedality, which freed the hands for, and therewith the mouth from, carrying – thus making possible the development of speech organs capable of producing an extraordinary range of nuanced sounds, of what Susanne Langer referred to as those ‘mouthy little noises we call words’.²⁹ This is but one corporeal example of what makes *Homo sapiens* so unique: the extraordinary flexibility of bodily instruments that enables humans to develop an even more far-ranging set of dexterities; and these, in turn, give human production that ‘universal’ – that is, adaptable and diverse – character that Marx contrasted

nineteenth century and perpetuated by Third-International Marxists of the twentieth. This mirror theory was a great gift to critics of historical materialism, who cling to it as an excuse not to take Marx seriously. Although the insistence on the primacy of human corporeal organisation can easily be misread as fitting into that reductionist tradition, a corporeal emphasis does not require a mirror theory of consciousness. Even though Marx’s aphorism that ‘consciousness [*das Bewusstsein*] can never be anything else but conscious existence [*das bewusste Sein*]' (Tucker 1978, p. 154) can be read in a reductionist manner, it should be understood more modestly, meaning simply that human beings are thinking bodies, integrated structures, all elements of which, and not just the mind alone, are indispensable to human being, and that the forms and contents of consciousness are inevitably related to the very embodied existence of people living at specific historical moments and in specific socio-cultural forms. Thus, it is not necessary to reject a purely analytical evaluation of the relative contributions of the various bodily instruments that might conclude that the human mind is the most unique of those instruments and the reason that humans have extended their power over the world and its non-human inhabitants. But the obviousness of this point obscures another point that should be so evident that it verges on the banal were it not occluded by the analytical focus on the mind: namely, the mind alone cannot even exist let alone carry out its projects; the mind is embedded in a body itself endowed with certain instruments, capacities, dexterities, and so on that enable it to realise its mental projections as objects/artefacts in the world. When Norman Geras quips ‘that no fish could be Mozart’ (1983, p. 109), this is not just because of brain size, but also because it takes human hands to play a piano and to write concertos. Antonio Gramsci made this point in response to his son’s musing about what life would be like if human brains were as big as those of elephants by asking: what good would a larger brain be without hands? Whereas Anaxagoras explained in a good materialist, corporeal, manner that humans are the most clever of creatures because of the uniqueness of human hands, Aristotle, the good idealist, thought that he had refuted Anaxagoras’s materialism with his explanation that: ‘man has hands because he is the most clever being. For the hands are a tool, and nature, like a clever man, distributes each thing to him who understands how to use it.’ (Anaxagoras and Aristotle are both cited in Katz 1925, p. 253.)

²⁹ Langer 1974, p. 61.

to the one-dimensional, instinctual production of other species.³⁰ These bodily instruments, and the corporeal dexterities to which they give rise, enable humans to produce the means necessary to enable them to break out of a narrow ecological niche of the kind inhabited by other species and to adapt to the most varied of niches from desert to polar regions and to create artificial instruments that allow us to develop the capacities embodied in other species such as moving through the air, on and under the water, for digging underground passages, building dams, and so forth.

Although the possibilities opened up by human bodily instruments are seemingly infinite, they are by no means unlimited. Beyond the changing limits of inherited socio-cultural conditions, it is the set of constraints, the needs and limits embedded in human corporeal organisation, that prevents humans from making history as they please, that imposes limits on the infinite variability of human cultures and on human malleability. The bodily constraints that most preoccupied Marx are systems of bodily needs – caloric intake, hydration, bodily warmth, and so on – whose satisfaction is the absolute precondition of human existence and which provide the impetus and telos of production. In this regard, it is, as Agnes Heller argues, useful (though, as I shall soon argue, insufficient) to characterise the biological or, as she calls them, the ‘natural needs’ of *Homo sapiens* as ‘not a group of needs but a limit concept: a limit (different for different societies) beyond which human life is no longer reproducible as such, beyond which the limit of bare existence is passed’.³¹ This, of course, corresponds to Marx’s insistence that human beings must first be able to live in order to be able to ‘make history’ and points specifically to the physiological imperative of bodily survival and reproduction (of the body, not yet next generation). When Marx refers to these needs as eating, drinking, abode, clothes and ‘still much else’,³² these are shorthand forms of saying that the body needs a certain number of calories to reproduce its cells, a certain amount of liquid to prevent dehydration, a certain amount of shelter to maintain its temperature within a fairly narrow range. Under ‘still much else’ we might include the equally obvious bodily needs for a certain amount of oxygen, rest and sleep – no doubt for a certain amount of exercise, too.³³ Looked at in this way, the set of bodily needs surely does

³⁰ Marx in Tucker 1978, p. 76.

³¹ Heller 1976, p. 32.

³² Marx 1845, p. 28.

³³ An anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this essay noted that this ‘still much else’ ‘keeps open the limits of what counts as a human need’ and suggested that a

represent quite literally a vital 'limit concept', the limits of human being. Every species has its 'limit concept' – and humans are no exceptions. For each species, of course, the contents of, and the range covered by, that limit concept varies. And the peculiarly human limits emerge when we begin to define those contents and delineate those ranges: how many calories, what kind of vitamins and minerals, what range of body temperature, how much rest and sleep (and when)? While the elasticity of physiological adaptation (to, for example, high altitudes) necessarily results in a degree of fuzziness at the borders which makes it impossible to define those limits with quantitative precision, we can assert with certainty the qualitative biological needs whose satisfaction is an absolute prerequisite of human existence.

Despite countless universalist accusations to the contrary, Marx endlessly insisted that human biological needs are always satisfied in socio-culturally specific ways. It would be platitudinous to state the obvious point that the fact that needs are always satisfied in socio-culturally specific ways does *not* abrogate the biological character of those needs, were it not for the numerous recent works in postmodern cultural studies insisting that there is no such thing as the 'natural' body and, therefore, that the only relevant analytical aspect is the culturally specific mode of satisfying biological needs. By thus severing the link between the body and culture, such studies retreat to a neo-idealist notion of human being, defined now 'culturally' rather than 'philosophically'. In a kind of decentred neo-Cartesianism, their insistence on the arbitrariness of cultural forms is a kind of declaration of the independence of those forms from the body. In thus treating (mentally-produced) cultural forms as if they had no relevant relation to the body, its needs and its capacities to satisfy those needs and produce new needs, wants and desires (of course, in socio-culturally specific ways), such postmodern studies of the body reiterate traditional philosophy's separation of body and mind. Having said that, however, it is imperative to acknowledge in our taxonomic categories the fact that biological needs are always satisfied in socio-culturally specific ways. Accordingly, we might speak of biological needs

historical-materialist taxonomy might 'include affective needs for interrelation and communication as well as the need for touch'. I fully agree. I have not dealt with these matters here, however, since the purposes of this essay are to explain what a historical-materialist taxonomy might be and why it is needed, and to develop its categorial apparatus. In my current book project, the theoretical issues addressed in this essay will serve as the introduction to Part III in which I develop the taxonomy and which will include discussion of such affective needs.

and their socio-cultural refinement or mediation – the biological needs providing the limit concept for our taxonomic sketch of *Homo sapiens*, and the category of socio-cultural mediation pointing to both the necessarily abstract character of the taxonomy and therewith too to the absolute necessity for historical-materialist analysis of the culturally specific ways of satisfying biological needs.

These socio-culturally mediated needs are themselves supplemented by socio-cultural determined wants and desires whose pertinence to the body is not always immediate.³⁴ At the level of abstraction involved in a historical-materialist taxonomy, it is not necessary to discuss the content of those socio-culturally refined needs nor of those socio-culturally determined wants and desires. But it is necessary to recognise the complexity of, and the range of, possible relations between, needs and wants and desires. On the one hand, postmodern cultural studies are right to point out that the cultural determination, for example, of what properly satisfies hunger and of what is considered too disgusting to eat can result in a situation that a starving person in need of food will not eat some form of nourishment because of cultural taboos. We may admire the power of culture to elevate mind over body, but we should not forget that rejection of food because of cultural taboos will ultimately lead to the pyrrhic victory of the body over mind – death. Nor should we forget that the opposite is also true – as perhaps most brashly maintained by Mick Jagger: you can't always get what you want, but you can get what you need. The tasks of determining the specific contents, and of reconstructing the mediated corporeal pertinence of, and the relations between, biological needs, their socio-cultural mediation and wants and desires falls to concrete historical-materialist analysis of specific socio-cultural forms. Here, however, it suffices to establish the nuanced range of sub-categories (biological needs, socio-culturally refined needs, socio-culturally determined wants and desires) that fall under the general heading of corporeal constraints.

In order to complete the inventory of corporeal constraints, it is necessary to supplement the category of needs with two related categories. These are bodily limits and constraints: limits such as those of the human sense organs or, most emphatically, human mortality; constraints such as human terrestriality and diurnality or those resulting from needs (for example, the need for oxygen which makes it impossible to live without artificial support above certain

³⁴ On needs and wants, see Archibald 1989, pp. 83–97 and Márkus 1978, pp. 9–12.

altitudinal limits or underwater). However, those corporeal factors that prevent us from making our history as we please – that which we lack and need, want or desire, that which constrains and even limits our capacities – should not be understood exclusively in negative terms as mere and passive limits. First of all, constraints and limits give definition and form to an organism that would otherwise be the living contradiction of a shapeless form. Constraints and limits force the organism to focus its energies, to direct them in relation to its predispositions or *Anlagen*, to exercise and develop the capacities and dexterities that it does have.³⁵ Furthermore, though Heller is right to see corporeal needs and constraints as ‘limit concepts’ that establish the boundaries of human being, they also present challenges that provoke the production of artefacts ranging from material goods to symbolic forms. It is the very elasticity of, and the creative capacities embedded in, our universal human corporeal organisation that can turn bodily limits into cultural opportunities and that create the variety of human worlds. As Marx noted in his double definition of the prerequisite of human existence, the ‘first historical act’ consists of satisfying needs and producing the means to satisfy those needs. As alluded to above, the far-ranging capabilities made possible by our bodily instruments and corporeal dexterities enable us to turn natural constraints into problems to be solved by human artifice – by, for example, building aeroplanes, developing means of artificial lighting, oxygen canisters for breathing at high altitudes or underwater.

Moreover, our bodily limits such as mortality, terrestriality, diurnality, and so forth also provide us with food for thought – the material which humans living in different socio-cultural contexts transform into a corporeally consistent variety of metaphors, symbolic forms and other semiotic artefacts. One need only think of the corporeally-based unitary logic underlying the various culturally-specific symbolic meanings attached to natural phenomena: how our terrestrial constraints provide the underlying logic beneath the culturally-varied meanings attached to the sky and sea; how our diurnal constraints provide that logic underlying culturally-varied meanings attached to night and day, to the sun and moon; how the limits of our bodies, our death, underlie the variety of meanings attached to mortality and immortality. Or consider the important cultural usages of temporary disruptions of our corporeal equilibrium. As Andre Leroi-Gourhan notes, ‘if we bear in mind

³⁵ Stephen Jay Gould (1980 and 1994) makes this point, focusing specifically on the significance of limits and constraints for evolutionary direction.

that in all cultures many unusual motor or verbal phenomena occur as a result of individuals being “transported” to a mental state other than their normal one, we must acknowledge that disturbances of the rhythmic balance do play an important role’.³⁶ Leroi-Gourhan gives examples of disruption of the visceral sensibility such as fasting, sexual abstinence and prolonged periods without sleep. We might add several examples of rituals that take advantage of the disruption of vestibular sensibility. From the aesthetic-religious sublime of trance dancers in Bali or the whirling dervishes of Islam to the banal but enjoyable thrill of riding a roller coaster, not to mention the use of substances that alter the mind’s chemistry, whether for insight, thrills or both – all of these, and many other, cultural practices consciously exploit the distortion of vestibular sensitivity for a brief walk on the unbalanced side. But it is precisely the abnormality, the transitoriness, that is the seduction; and the return to normality is quite literally the salvation. We simply could not live with permanent disruption of our vestibular sensitivity – or, were our bodies so constituted that we could, we would be different beings with vastly different cultural forms. These rather basic examples clearly indicate that, though cultural forms are certainly relative, they are not arbitrary; they are inextricably linked to human corporeal organisation and mediated through social practice. In this way, the body is, as Elaine Scarry put it, the ‘the interior structure’ also of semiotic artefacts.³⁷

At this point, the construction of the categorial framework for a historical-materialist taxonomy is complete. It begins with the generic category of *Anlagen* denoting the general predispositions embedded in human corporeal organisation. It then moves to the two sub-categories that together establish the range of human corporeal predisposition: one delineating those aspects of human corporeal organisation that allows us to make our own history – the bodily instruments, capacities, and dexterities; and the other delineating those bodily attributes that prevent us from making our history as we please – bodily needs, (socio-culturally mediated) wants and desires, and bodily limits and constraints which themselves could be transformed into challenges that humans solve through the production of artifice. Having constructed the framework for this taxonomy, the next question, and the last that will be addressed in this essay, is: What is its methodological place-value? That is: What can it do? What can it not do? How do we use it?

³⁶ Leroi-Gourhan 1993, p. 284.

³⁷ See Scarry 1985, Chapter 5.

Methodological place-value

Precisely because there are so many theoretical dangers in talking about ‘the body’, it is absolutely crucial to define very carefully the capacities and limits of this taxonomy – its methodological place-value in historical-materialist analysis. Several of the potential dangers and abuses of any attempt – the present one included – to define ‘the human body’ were mentioned above. The greatest danger that would produce the greatest abuse would be to posit as universal a particularist definition of ‘the body’ and then illegitimately to impose it on all bodies. The methodological means to avoid this risk lies in a proper understanding of the nature and use of historical-materialist abstraction.

In *Capital*, Marx abstracted from really existing capitalist societies in their historical, national and cultural specificities, and from really existing individuals whom he consciously treated as bearers of economic categories, for the methodological purpose of presenting the general logic of the capitalist mode of production and of its valorisation and exploitation process. In like manner, in order to construct the categorial framework for a historical-materialist taxonomy of human corporeal organisation, it was necessary here to abstract from those same specificities, from the concrete diversity of cultural forms. The methodological purpose of these abstractions was to determine what it is that defines the possibilities and limits of human being, that establishes the infinite possibilities and ultimate limits of the diversity of cultural forms and human histories. *Capital* is not a depiction of any existing capitalist society, nor is this taxonomy a depiction of any existing human body. Both are conscious abstractions necessary for certain purposes, but necessarily insufficient for others.

Let us begin with its insufficiencies which result from the fact that it is an (albeit conscious) abstraction. Marx himself was well aware of the danger of confusing an abstraction with reality and imposing the former on the latter. While developing the overall framework of his materialist conception of history in the *German Ideology*, he explained the methodological place-value of the ‘general results, abstractions which [arose] from [his] observation of the historical development of people’: ‘viewed apart from real history’, he insisted, ‘these abstractions have *no value whatsoever*. They can only serve to facilitate the arrangement of historical material, to indicate the sequence of its separate strata. But they by no means afford a recipe or schema, as does

philosophy, for neatly trimming the epochs of history' (my emphasis).³⁸ And, later, in the Introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy*, he referred to such abstractions as the 'guiding threads' of his study.³⁹ In like manner, and as an abstraction, a historical-materialist taxonomy of human corporeal organisation can provide a research direction and the guiding threads for historical-materialist research and analysis; it can, among other things, lead us to consider the bodily dimensions of human history and sensitise us to the corporeal roots of cultural forms. But only if we acknowledge its abstract character, draw the methodological consequences and analyse 'real history' consisting of real bodies can we avoid the deterministic and reductionist consequences of confusing the abstraction with reality and imposing it as an *a priori* recipe or schema on real bodies in their concrete cultural specificity.

Perhaps the greatest danger facing such a taxonomy is its potential abuse to occlude issues of race or gender. Though I fear that a brief comment on such crucial and complex topics may be a greater injustice than no comment at all, I must at least emphasise two points on the relation between this taxonomy's abstract conception of human corporeal organisation and the multiplicity of really existing bodies that might indicate ways of addressing these issues more thoroughly. As I have argued throughout, the reason for talking in the singular about human corporeal organisation as the object of a historical-materialist taxonomy is to define what it is about human beings that allows them to make their own histories and that delineates the corporeal possibilities and limits of the histories they can make. As should be obvious, the same set of culture-creating instruments, capacities and dexterities (human hands, a human brain, human perceptual systems and a human supra-laryngeal tract) is common to all races and sexes. This is why any visitor to a zoo can differentiate human beings, regardless of sex or race, from other species. And this is why it is possible to speak generically (and abstractly) of human corporeal organisation. The kinds of histories that different groups of humans make will, of course, vary according to social form and technology, geography, the legacy of the group's own past and the particular kind of cultural forms it develops. In the production of those cultural forms, sexual dimorphism and phenotypic differences, real or imagined,⁴⁰ can become objects of socio-

³⁸ Marx in Tucker 1978, p. 155 [emphasis added].

³⁹ Marx in Tucker 1978, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Another anonymous reviewer of the earlier draft insists that 'it is a mistake to

cultural mediation in the construction of socially efficacious symbolic forms. Although race is a cultural construct, if all human beings were of the same skin colour and had the same physiognomic attributes, there would be no foundation for its construction. Although gender is a cultural construct, if humans reproduced asexually, there would be no foundation for its construction. The problem lies not in the recognition of physiological differences, but in the issuance of hierarchical verdicts on their significance that both produce and support exploitation, oppression and discrimination. The particular content of those semiotic forms cannot be predicted by any general theory. But it can be analysed in a historical-materialist manner and understood as the particular product of people living within a specific set of social relations inscribing particular meanings onto what are constructed as racialised or gendered bodies.

Although there are many dangers to be recognised and avoided, an abstract historical-materialist taxonomy of human corporeal organisation has several possible uses. Even though Marx himself never systematised his thoughts on the body nor developed such a taxonomy, it is implicit in the foundations of his work. As mentioned above, his corporeal approach to human being allowed him to rethink and expand the structure and content of historical analysis to include not just the mind and philosophy, but also the corporeal capacities that are essential to the making of history and the needs, wants, limits and

suggest by analogy with gender that such [phenotypic] differences are just out there waiting to be socially mediated' into racial constructions. Noting pseudo-scientific attempts in England and the US to differentiate the Irish as a distinct race on the basis of 'alleged differences in brain size, morality, religion and level of "civilisation"', this reviewer rightly points out that classifications of race have also been constructed on the basis of *imagined* phenotypic differences. Another example is the not infrequent use of racial terminology in late-nineteenth Germany, England and the US to refer to the working class as a 'breed' or a 'race' apart. But it seems safe to say that the category of 'race' itself was derived, long before genetics could expose the fallacy, from phenotypic differences in skin color or physiognomy; and, once derived, it could then be, and was, applied to the kind of imagined differences noted by the reviewer. This reviewer also argues (and I agree) that whereas 'there is some biological basis to at least some gender categories . . . with respect to the biology of human reproduction', there is no such 'natural-biological substratum where race is concerned'. Some feminist theorists, most notably Judith Butler (1993), dispute this claim of an 'irreducible materiality' that gives rise to gender and gendered categories. But, though gender may be 'performative' in Butler's sense and multiple, and though the distribution of sex organs and hormones may not fall as neatly into male and female as is generally assumed, the various permutations are limited by, and fall between, these two poles. Aristophanes's 'third sex' in the *Symposium*, for example, is only a synthesis of male and female. The permutations and possibilities, and therewith the cultural constructions, of gender would be vastly different if the human species was truly made up of more than two 'irreducibly' biological sexes.

constraints that establish the outer boundaries of possible human histories. Marx's construction of categories grounded in human corporeal organisation, furthermore, enabled him to decipher the exploitative character of capitalism and to expose the corporeal depths of capitalist immiseration. In this way, he wielded human corporeal organisation as a limited, but effective, normative measure for social critique and as an attribute of freedom: labour practices which deform the body and atrophy its dexterities are indicators of exploitation, while those that enhance its capacities and cultivate its dexterities are emancipatory.

But these were only Marx's first steps toward winning his wager on reconstructing everything from a bodily foundation. Of the many remaining challenges, perhaps the greatest and most complex lies in the analysis of cultural forms. As I have indicated above, a corporeal turn rooted in a materialist conception of history opens up immense possibilities for the analysis of cultural forms. Concern with the relation between the body and cultural forms has generally been absent from historical-materialist theory, and most of the work in the last few decades ostensibly on 'the body' has been done by poststructuralists and postmodernists who have taken a linguistic or cultural turn.⁴¹ Such approaches have been invaluable in exposing how the body is constituted and/or disciplined by symbolic, semiotic, cultural, or discursive systems. However useful these cultural turns toward the body are for the analysis of signs, symbols, discourse and cultures, they tend methodologically to dissolve the materiality of the body into a semiotically, symbolically, discursively or culturally constituted mental construct. That is, they always treat the body as *constituted by* meaning, but not as being in any way *constitutive*

⁴¹ One notable exception is David McNally's *Bodies of Meaning* (2001). In the Introduction and third chapter, entitled 'Bodies that Talk: Sex, Tools, Language, and Human Culture', McNally sketches a notion of 'corporeal reason' that has several affinities with my attempt in this essay to develop a historical-materialist taxonomy which is itself part of my larger book project entitled *Historical Materialism as Corporeal Semiotics*. The difference, however, is that McNally focuses on the reification of language in capitalist society and seeks to elaborate an emancipatory linguistic practice which understands that, and how, language is rooted in the body. This very important focus results in formulations that are both perfectly appropriate and susceptible to abuse. He rightly insists that the body, capitalistically-deployed, is 'a site of domination' that, however, remains 'the space of slumbering powers of emancipation' (p. 229). If this accurate depiction of the capitalist deployment of the body (and the body as a site of memory), is 'universalised' and taken as the extent of 'corporeal reason', the result would be a reduction of corporeality to a logic of embodiment rather than an elaboration of it as the body's logic. McNally's book has produced a spirited exchange between Chik Collins and himself. See Collins 2003 and McNally 2004.

of meaning. Their semiotic nod toward the body wants to grasp humans as embodied in the world; but they treat the body as essentially the locus of thought and seek to explain how the embodied mind has been culturally inscribed. Concerned with embodied minds rather than thinking bodies, their focus on 'skin-deep' inscriptions results in a silhouette-like view of the body that relegates its materiality and culture-creating capacities to the shadows.

One need not deny that all cultures inscribe the body with meanings to assert that the body is more than its cultural inscriptions. Indeed, these inscriptions themselves pertain to the textured materiality of corporeality as the site of needs, wants, desires, limits, constraints and capacities. To understand inscriptions on the body, therefore, it is not sufficient to take a linguistic/cultural turn toward the body and focus only on their textuality. The body itself as the site of inscription and the mode (that is, the means, social relations and purpose) of inscription are as important to deciphering their meanings as are the inscriptions themselves. Thus, in order to decipher inscribed bodies, the analysis of the textuality of the inscriptions must first be grounded in a corporeal turn toward society and culture – an historical-materialist turn that acknowledges human corporeal organisation as the starting point of historical theory, that understands thinking bodies, distributed in social space according to the logic of the social relations of production, as the producers of human worlds consisting of not only material, but also semiotic artefacts. Such a turn would lead us to view the body – its capacities and dexterities as well as its needs and constraints – as 'the interior structure of the artefact'⁴² and would help us to see the corporeal traces that inhere in cultural forms.

Taking such a turn would also require us to confront questions of geographical and ecological space. As Marx insisted immediately after having

⁴² See Scarry 1985. Combining Scarry and Marx, we can view artefacts, both material and semiotic, as corporeal hieroglyphs. To decipher these hieroglyphs, we must answer at least two questions: What kind of bodily capacities were requisite for their production? How do they pertain to the body and its 'sentience' (as Scarry puts it)? In my larger project (of which this historical-materialist taxonomy will be a part), I am attempting to develop a historical-materialist key to facilitate the process of deciphering. This key, I suggest, lies in elaborating ideas proposed by Mark Johnson. Johnson 1987 explains the roots of conceptual meanings and the structure of reason itself in terms of image-schemata derived from human corporeality. He constructs image schemata based on embodied experience and derives from them a wide range of what had been considered purely abstract ideas. He shows, for example, how our bodily sense of balance provides an image schema whose metaphorical projections provide us with ideas of aesthetic proportion, rational argument, psychological equilibrium and justice. I suggest that the same is possible in the analysis of symbolic meanings and cultural forms.

established it as the first fact of historical theory, human corporeal organisation entails 'a relation to the rest of nature'. While noting that he could at that point discuss neither that corporeal organisation nor its relation to nature, he listed the 'natural foundations of historical writing' – 'the geological, orohydrographical, climatic, and other relations' – and he insisted that historical writing must 'begin with those natural foundations and their modification in the course of history by human actions', themselves made possible by human corporeal organisation.⁴³ Though Marx had to set aside his concerns with these matters in order to focus on deciphering the capitalist mode of production, they must be confronted if historical materialism is to go beyond theoretical abstractions and grasp the concrete lives of real people. For the very nature of needs, wants, and desires, as well as the preferred means of their satisfaction, are obviously not unrelated to the geographical locus of a social group, to the site-specific geology and climate, flora and fauna. Equally obviously, the site-specific complex of needs, wants and desires, as well as the site-specific capabilities and dexterities developed to satisfy them will inevitably serve as the 'raw material' for the semiotic production of meanings specific to those needs and practices and produce the specificity of cultural forms practices, rituals, and so on. Here, too, is a concrete example of how the complex of bodily needs is not only a 'limit concept' nor a 'simple prerequisite' of human history, but, to borrow Marx's term, a *Produktivkraft*, a force in the production of cultural forms, a positive provocation to people inhabiting particular geographical sites to develop commensurately particular cultural forms. To neglect the complex of site-specific bodily needs and capabilities and ignore the way they very literally inform cultural forms is to disembodify society and culture and to slip into an idealist conception of history.

The analysis of cultural forms from a bodily foundation and in a site-specific manner are just two of the many new horizons opened up by historical materialism's corporeal turn. Although Marx initiated that turn, he barely had time to glimpse around the bend. And, here, I have done little more than systematise his scattered but insightful thoughts on the role of the body in a materialist conception of history. It is up to us to explore the corporeal horizons opened up by his initial efforts. And the best way to do so is to take seriously his insistence that human corporeal organisation is the first fact to be established for historical theory, to establish this fact by recognising the astonishingly

⁴³ Marx 1845, pp. 149–50.

flexible and malleable capacities and dexterities, and the needs and constraints, embedded in human corporeal organisation, and to proceed from that basis to study the modes of human being, of socio-cultural forms, in their infinite though not unlimited diversity. Such a starting point provides the means to carve a path between and beyond the binaries that trapped Sayers and others, to confront both poles of the essentialist/relativist, natural/social binaries without being tied to either, to avoid dogmatic universalism and arbitrary relativism. It also provides the means to look at both socio-cultural diversity and historical change while avoiding any kind of teleology or Whiggish view of history as evolution from the 'primitive' to the 'civilised'. In short, it provides the means to confront the challenges that Eagleton enumerated as obstacles to winning the breathtaking wager on reconstructing history from a bodily foundation.

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